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Spy Follies

Paris.

THERE IS A LESSON in human folly in the curious case of the retired spy, now being tried in Sydney, Australia, but a lesson, as well, in the morbid preoccupations of the world of secret intelligence. Lord Victor Rothschild, an eminent scientist, war hero and former intelligence agent himself, is a casualty.

The essence of the court case in Sydney can be put in a few words. Peter Wright, who worked for the

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British internal security agency MI5, and now retired to Australia, wants to publish a book in which he accuses a former MI5 chief, the late Sir Roger Hollis, of being the "fifth man" in the Burgess-Maclean-Philby-Blunt spy ring. He also tells of several MI5 indiscretions, including tapping the telephones of former Labor Prime Minister Harold Wilson. The British government has sued to stop publication.

Victor Rothschild, of the British branch of the celebrated banking family, head of the government's "think tank" under Prime Minister Edward Heath, was at Cambridge at the same time as Anthony Blunt, Donald Maclean, Guy Burgess and Kim Philby and was, like them, a youthful Marxist.

Like them, he went into the wartime security service and was decorated for valor. He remained a friend of the late Anthony Blunt and loaned a flat to Blunt and Burgess for a time during the war. As a result, when their treason became known, he came under suspicion as well. This was known inside the security services and gossiped about outside government.

When Mr. Wright and several other MI5 officers decided that Roger Hollis was, in fact, the fifth man (others continued to dispute this), Lord Rothschild privately encouraged Mr. Wright to make his evidence known to a journalist writing a book on spy scandals. That was several years ago. That he had done so came out in the course of the current trial in Sydney. Lord Rothschild found himself more in the public eye than ever before.

He appealed to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to declare that she knew he had never been a spy. In Parliament December 4, Mrs. Thatcher refused to make such a statement. The following day, under pressure to say something, she made a sensationally negative statement, that she had been "advised that we have no evidence that he was ever a Soviet agent."

Lord Rothschild made a second appeal, to the head of MI5 this time, to affirm that he had "unequivocal, repeat, unequivocal evidence that I am not and never have been a Soviet agent." As of last Thursday, MI5 remained silent.

The story of the "Cambridge spies" is by now chiefly of interest as a social and moral phenomenon in the history of the British privileged classes during the Great Depression and World War II. Their practical accomplishments as spies may be questioned. But then, the value of spies themselves may be doubted.

Mr. Philby provided Moscow with information on intercepted German military communications confirming what the Soviets already were being voluntarily told by London. After the war he betrayed Western intelligence operations in Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R.

Donald Maclean helped pass on nuclear secrets from Washington. Thanks to him and to Guy Burgess in London, the Soviets had early information on Anglo-American policy developments during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Did this change anything of consequence? Mr. Philby's greatest success, on his own account, was to have maneuvered himself into the post of head of the intelligence department charged with penetrating Soviet intelligence.

The triumph is a significant one and a comment on what spying is all about: He succeeded in spying on British spies, as they spied on Soviet spies, spying on them. It had little connection to the real world of national decision and action.

As far as has been made public, the greatest achievement of British postwar intelligence was the Penkovsky affair, in which Britain ran an agent inside the Kremlin itself. The information usually cited as more than anything else justifying the Penkovsky operation is the colonel's assurance to the West that the U.S.S.R. would not launch nuclear war in the Cuban missile crisis. What knowledgeable student of Soviet policy and society, or informed military analyst, needed Col. Oleg Penkovsky to know that the Soviet government would not commit national suicide?

Spies fascinate us because their trade promises secret knowledge, and secret knowledge seems power. The promise, though, nearly always is empty. The truly useful wartime intelligence came from breaking German and Japanese codes. Codebreaking, electronic and satellite intelligence remain the principal sources of "hard" intelligence today. The rest — "agent intelligence" — obsessively tends toward the penetration and counter-penetration of other intelligence services. It tends toward the state of mind in which evidence means the opposite of what it seems. Lord Rothschild's demand for vindication was apparently based on his having contributed to the evidence of Kim Philby's guilt. But — the hostile interrogator asks — what better way for a spy to ingratiate himself?

The secret world is a morbid one, seductive to men and women unsure of their own identities and reassured by the shelter of secrecy and the possession of secret power. Secrecy puts them apart from the practical world of rational cause and result. It may also encourage them to think themselves empowered to act outside the limits to which others are held, since they know what others do not know. That way lies folly — folly of the kind committed in Washington in recent months.